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IBSEN AS A DRAMATIST¹

When "The League of Youth," the first of his prose social dramas, was produced in 1867, Ibsen was forty-one years old, and had already written twelve dramatic pieces. Two of these—the poetic dramas, "Brand" and "Peer Gynt"—are masterpieces; all of them show the born dramatist. Long training, therefore, together with the dramatic gift, has gone to the making of the social dramas; and this training and this gift must be reckoned with. Ibsen the dramatist is as great as Ibsen the individualist; the two cannot be separated, and, indeed, the one, in a sense, determines the other. Both have been dominant in Ibsen almost from the first. He has stood apart from his fellows, watching their movements with the curiosity (not always perfectly sane) of a psychologist and the instincts of a dramatist. The queer incidents of Ibsen's boyhood—intrinsically unimportant—show that the child was father to the man. The black poodle with glowing red eyes that lived in the church-tower of his birth town; the pillory "with its gloomy mysteries;" the town-jail where criminals and mad-folk were confined;—these were the objects, Ibsen says, that most impressed his childhood. This aloofness—already presaging an unsocial nature—was greatly intensified when Ibsen was eight years old by the business failure of his father and the necessity of the family to live upon a farm outside the village. From this period until he was sixteen, when he moved to Grimstad, Ibsen gave free rein to his gloomy and solitary habits. He played alone or mused over a few old books, and his brothers and sisters failed to draw him into their outdoor sports. In all this, as well as in the juvenile dramatics of Sunday afternoons, Jæger professes to find the beginnings of Ibsen the individualist and Ibsen the dramatist.

At sixteen he went to Grimstad to become drug-clerk, where his early peculiarities, instead of being subdued by contact with society, developed more and more. But one result could come from a nature like Ibsen's—a clash with the social forces around

¹ Principally based on the nine social dramas included in Mr. Archer's translations, published in this country by Scribners.

him. Reserved, shy, taciturn, deep, he found nothing congenial in the community. The people interfered (or he thought they did) with his free development as an individual. Not understanding him, they misunderstood him. Left alone, he wandered among the hills, often by moonlight and late, when his soul was most apt to find itself:

Here in this wild and stormy place
My soul at last finds rest,
And here to me seems Nature's face
Reflected in my breast.

—*Jæger's Translation.*

The mood here expressed was not transient: essentially it never left him. Ibsen's individualism, his voluntary alienation from a society and a world he more and more despised, — all comes out in this enjoyment of nature in her wildest recesses and her loneliest hours. Something mystic, brooding, melancholy developed in the young poet — a spirit romantic indeed, but not hollow nor touched with "windy sentimentalism." Instead of participating in the gaieties of a ball, he prefers standing by to ask himself searching questions concerning the lives of the dancers; and he finds "anticipation, hope, and disappointment" to be the "whole story of human life." Individualism, then, with an undercurrent of mysticism, gloom, and even cynicism, constitutes Ibsen's temperament as well as his philosophy, and lies at the very basis of his poetic criticism of life, profoundly affecting the form and the substance of his later dramatic work.

Ibsen brought out his first drama, "Catilina," in 1850. The work was a failure at the hands of the theatrical managers and the public, and justly so, for it has the crudities of youth (judging from Jæger's analysis) and is lacking in dramatic situation and in mastery of detail. But the play is important because it is characteristic, and characteristic in two ways: in its subject and its manner. Its subject is social — the protest of the individual against the deadening restraints and conventions of society. Ibsen himself may easily be identified with his hero at war with a corrupting and narrowing environment. The work is thus written upon a truly Ibsen theme. Its manner is not less typical: the subjective, psychological manner of which Ibsen is now an ac-

knowledge master. He says himself: "Many things and much upon which my later work has turned—the consideration between endowment and desire, between capacity and will, at once the entire comedy and tragedy of mankind and of the individual—may here be dimly discerned."

In 1850 Ibsen went to Christiania to prepare for examinations previous to entering the university. But his poetic and dramatic instincts were too strong for the systematic life of a student. He wrote a one-act play called "The Warriors' Tomb," performed at the Christiania Theatre, September 26, 1850. Next year came a musical tragedy in three acts, called "Norma: or a Politician's Love"—a satirical piece unpublished. In consequence of these dramas his reputation grew, and in November, 1851, Ibsen was appointed Theatre-Poet of a newly-built theatre at Bergen, erected in response to a fresh interest in Norway as a nation. He received a small travelling stipend and visited theatres at Copenhagen and at Dresden where he studied the production of many kinds of plays from "Hamlet" to "Bataille de Dames." In 1851 the influence of Scribe was at its height, and Ibsen learned much from that most skillful of contemporary French playwrights. Returning to Bergen he took up the duties of his position. Says Jæger: "For about ten years he was bound to the Norwegian theatre in the capacity of stage-manager and during this time produced at least a hundred pieces." This was exactly the training Ibsen could most profit by. No other art is more difficult to master than the art of successful stage-craft, and Ibsen's close contact with the theatre and its audiences resulted, at the end of a decade, in making him a master of dramaturgy, and at the end of two decades more, the supreme master in his century. Besides presenting numerous pieces of other authors, from Shakespeare to Scribe, he wrote and presented four of his own, two of which have not been published. They represent a conflict in Ibsen between the realism which was inherent in him and the romanticism and patriotism which were demanded by the taste of the time. As such they are important; intrinsically they are not. Yet his reputation continued to grow, and in 1857 he was elected director of the Norwegian Theatre at Christiania.

The first play of Ibsen's brought out at Christiania, "The Warriors of Helgeland," was written as a result of his already aroused interest in the Sagas, and partly in deference to popular feeling. Interesting and penetrating as this drama is, it is not so characteristic of the real Ibsen as "Love's Comedy," a satirical play in verse, published in 1862, but not then produced on the stage. Here, again, Ibsen turns from romantic and patriotic themes to attack modern society in the realistic manner. None of the other plays thus far written so much reminds us of the author of the later prose dramas as does "Love's Comedy." The play has the extravagance of youth, its fervor, its unrestraint, its almost savage bitterness; but it has also the poetry of youth, its uncompromising idealism, its insistence upon a free development of the individual. In Falk, as before in Catiline, we see Ibsen the persistent champion of individualism. The sudden and unnatural breaking off of the engagement of Falk and Svanhild expresses Ibsen's belief that the high moments of life must exist for us as blissful memories only, since they cannot endure in conventional society. The play brought upon its author calumny and journalistic satire of the roughest kind. Heightening this unpopularity came the strong, deep, psychological drama, "The Pretenders," which failed. The storm became too severe, and Ibsen found Christiania no longer endurable. Securing a travelling stipend from the government, in April, 1864, he turned his face towards Rome.

It does not come within the scope of this paper to consider the two poetic dramas which Ibsen next produced, nor the long double historical play, "Emperor and Galilean." Both "Brand" and "Peer Gynt," written in rapid succession, are great works, and establish Ibsen's reputation deservedly high. The point to note here is that in spite of the poetic form and romantic method of these dramas, they are in theme intensely realistic and dramatic. The problems presented are thoroughly modern—and for that matter thoroughly eternal;—and such situations as that of Agnes in the fourth act of "Brand," and that of the hero in the fifth act of "Peer Gynt" are powerfully dramatic. "Emperor and Galilean," a product of Ibsen's interest in Roman history, aroused by his visit to Rome, though rather heavy

in manner, shows again his realistic temper, his absorbing curiosity in modern psychological problems, and his peculiar manner of treatment. But even before this drama was completed, Ibsen had produced his "League of Youth," the first of the series of prose dramas which are realistic and modern not only in theme, but in manner as well. To the making of this remarkable series, as we have now seen, Ibsen brought a strong and original personality, an intense individualistic temper touched with gloom, mysticism and cynicism, and a native dramatic gift; but a gift now highly cultivated not only by the composition of a dozen dramas, but also by a ten-years' experience as stage-director. As for the subject-matter of his plays, Ibsen has always been essentially a psychological or analytic realist; he now cast aside forever his romantic manner and fitted his dramas to a form far better suited to their substance—the form of light, swift, conversational prose.

Yet Ibsen with all his gifts and training does not begin as a master-artist. With Chaucer he might, perhaps, have said:

The lyf so short, the craft so long to lerne!

But no writer of the nineteenth century has been more devoted to his art. Once in his youth when talking with his sister, he expressed the wish that before he died he might attain "the utmost possible clearness of vision and fulness of power." Whether or not he has reached his goal, I have not here to discuss, but that he has practised his art with increasingly surer mastery, no one will deny who has read his plays chronologically from "The League of Youth" to "When We Dead Awake."

In order to see this development let us first look at Ibsen on the side of his dramatic structure, or his building of plots. "The League of Youth" is perhaps two parts Ibsen to three of Scribe. The first two acts of this play (by the way, wholly unlike any first two acts of a later play), which unfold the character and situation of Stensgard, are Ibsen's through and through. The interesting and realistic picture of the party at the Chamberlain's, with the exposure of the demagogue at the end of the second act, are scarcely in the Scribe manner. From this point on, however, the machinery obtrudes, and a three-cornered love-intrigue deadens the interest in the political situa-

tion. The Scribe method, with the obvious trick of the letters, is used to untie the entanglement.

Ibsen's next play, "The Pillars of Society," shows an interesting advance in plot-building. We might—with less confidence, however,—call this drama half Ibsen and half Scribe. There is scarcely anything in Ibsen finer than the exposition. How naturally and smoothly is a complex situation unfolded! The ship *Indian Girl* needing repairs, the picture of a moral society with the prig Rörlund as its ruling spirit, the half revelation of the situation of Dina and of the story of Lona, the reputed unselfish and moral character of Bernick, the railroad enterprise, the announcement of Lona who enters and of Johun, whose entrance is adroitly postponed for the next act—all this complex situation, part of which explains the past and part of which unfolds the present, is unrolled in a masterful manner. Through the second and third acts the character of Bernick is further developed with heightening interest and with perfectly logical precision. What is the situation at the close of act three? Johun, now foiled in his desire to marry Dina and in full knowledge of Bernick's character, threatens him with revenge and exposure. But he will first go to America, and he will sail in the rotten *Indian Girl*, though a storm is already prophesied. To heighten the tragic intensity, Ibsen makes little Olaf steal away from home and hide in the hold of the vessel. Up to this point, then, the plot is developed with subtlety, with precision, with a rising interest. The ship must sail and must go down with Johun and Olaf, at least, on board. Of course the ship does not sail and the plot breaks to pieces. Ibsen's exit from his situation appears to me perfectly trivial. We learn from Lona in the last act that Johun, having got Dina to go with him, "dared not trust such a precious freight to that rotten old tub. Johun and Dina have sailed in the *Palm Tree*." Thus again Ibsen resorts to the Scribe formula. But the plot has a yet graver defect, the defect of being based on a situation wholly impossible. I mean the situation of Johun's taking upon himself the infamy of the adulterer Bernick in order that the latter may marry his sister of spotless name and fame. This is unnatural, repulsive, false.

Structurally, "A Doll's House" is greatly superior to both these earlier dramas. In a work as brilliantly effective one hesitates to point out flaws. But half, or at least a third, of the dramatic intensity (for there is a very real intensity) is derived from the suspense caused by the letter in the box. There is no reason — no fatal reason — why it should be there. Krogstad, in real life, would write no letter; he would go straight to Helmer and talk matters out with him. But Ibsen has not yet cut completely loose from the Scribe influence, and he again uses machinery; uses it, indeed, in this instance, with far greater skill and effect than Scribe could have used it, but still it is machinery, not the inevitability of great art.

"Ghosts" is the first of the Ibsen plays in which the Scribe formula is completely cast aside. In structure "Ghosts" is well-nigh faultless. It moves forward with the certainty, the fatality of a Greek tragedy. Criticism almost descends to fault-finding when it stoops to point out a single flaw, and that by no means affecting the integrity of the plot. It is certainly not inevitable that the orphanage should burn, though not improbable. But whether it burned or not, it is difficult to see how its fate could materially affect the outcome of the drama, so far as the characters in the total result are concerned. It is true that Regina might have had to change her plans, but not her purpose. On the other hand, how much, by way of suggestion, does Ibsen make out of the burning! The memory of Mrs. Alving's husband, instead of being perpetuated by an orphanage, will be kept up by a brothel, for such the Soldiers' Home will become under the management of Engstrand.

Once more and *but* once more, in the dramas up to "Hedda Gabler," Ibsen impairs his structure by resorting to artifice. "An Enemy of the People," though less interesting on other grounds, moves smoothly, directly, and inevitably up to the meeting of the brothers in the third act. This meeting is a *scène à faire*, but it is accomplished by Burgomaster Stockmann's leaving his hat and cane in the printing office, where they are discovered by the Doctor. This is, structurally, a mistake, due probably to the heat and haste in which the drama was written; it is the one drama produced in a year's time.

"The Wild Duck," "Rosmersholm," "The Lady from the Sea," while faulty in other respects, move forward with unerring precision, with the sureness of touch and inevitability that denote the master-hand. From first to last these dramas are splendid specimens of coherent plot-structure, without tricks, without forced situations, without the obtrusive Scribe machinery. Far more relentless in its total effect, but supremely hideous as a work of art is "Hedda Gabler." Yet in structure this drama is not flawless. I do not see inevitableness in the finding of the lost manuscript by Tesman, and, particularly, in his reason for not immediately returning it to Lövborg. In all this there is a suspicion of factitiousness. This is but a speck, however, and we may justly say that Ibsen, in sheer craftsmanship, has now attained his coveted "fulness of power." Greater than Scribe, than Augier, than Dumas, he is even, in this aspect of his art, superior to Molière and to Shakespeare.

More interesting than his structure, because more original, are his methods of dramatic exposition and development. We have seen that Ibsen from the beginning tends to be psychological and realistic in his theme even when his manner is romantic. Like Browning, he possesses a restless intellectual curiosity in the play of the subtle, deep, formative forces that have so large a share in the making or unmaking of cultivated minds. (It is noteworthy that Ibsen's characters and the situations are mostly chosen from higher middle-class society.) Unlike Browning, Ibsen is a great dramatist with the faculty of presenting objectively situations in themselves intensely subjective. But such subjective and tragic situations are necessarily culminating moments on the stage as in life. The action, therefore, must be greatly compressed. "Othello" and "Macbeth" move more swiftly than "Henry IV" and "As You Like It;" but "Othello" and "Macbeth" do not move so swiftly as "Ghosts" and "Rosmersholm." Where Ibsen gains in rapidity, and hence in intensity of tragic effect, is in his omission, in these prose dramas, of all but the final consequences of a given situation; these consequences make the play. Of the nine dramas we are here considering but one, and that the first, "The League of Youth," is an exception to this method of development. This

piece in its opening takes nothing for granted and has no past to be unfolded. Coming to "The Pillars of Society," we find that the situation here is the culmination of a series of events that happened some fifteen years before. And so with all the rest — "A Doll's House," "Ghosts," "Rosmersholm." In the case of "An Enemy of the People," and "Hedda Gabler," the past is less the basis of the action, though it has to be considered.

With such condensation of situation and action, Ibsen's method of exposition becomes fascinating as a study and a signal proof of his skill as a craftsman. He does not unfold the past at once, but presents it bit by bit as the action demands it, thus spurring the interest as the play proceeds. In "The Pillars of Society" we saw how well he suggests the past in the first act in the half-revelation of the situation of Dina and the story of Lona; how just at the end of the act curiosity is excited by the entrance of Lona and the expected entrance of Johun. The exposure of Bernick's past in the second act of this play is finely done; but finer still, in the same act, is the situation in which Johun learns for the first time the treachery of his supposed friend. I mean the interference of the prig Rörlund who, thinking to save Dina, tells her in the presence of Johun that the latter is her father and a thief; whereupon Johun, totally surprised and perplexed, tells these facts to the false Bernick as the curtain falls. A yet better instance of Ibsen's masterly exposition is seen in "Ghosts." This is a play in three acts, and it is not until the end of the second act that we are in full possession of the past upon which the action is founded. But we get sufficient information to understand each movement as the play proceeds. Note the suggestions early in the first act — the recent return of Oswald, the hinted bastardy of Regina, allusions to her physical beauty, the mention of the asylum, and the coming of Pastor Manders. All these give us no clue to the main situation but do stimulate curiosity. With the entrance of Manders and his talk with Mrs. Alving, we know a little more about the Orphanage. Then Oswald comes in, reminding Mrs. Alving of her husband and speaking frankly of his sympathy with the illicit associations of the Parisian artists. Just after Oswald withdraws, Mrs. Alving tells Pastor Manders the story

of her dissolute husband, a perfect voluptuary, and says that she is founding an orphanage to perpetuate his reputation for duty and decency. At this point through the open door of the dining-room, where are Oswald and Regina, Mrs. Alving hears a suspicious shuffling and says half to herself,—“Ghosts!” The second act is over, but the past is not yet fully disclosed. In the last act we learn that Regina is Mr. Alving’s illegitimate child and that Oswald is a physical wreck, due to a disease which a Paris doctor told him he inherited. There is nothing more to be told; we see the climax of the fatal consequences.

It would be easy to adduce further instances of superb exposition—exposition which, indeed, has its dangers in a too rapid development of characters. Witness Nora and Rebecca. But I wish now to point out, briefly, some other ways by which Ibsen secures the condensation and rapidity so admirably suited to his psychological drama. One of these is his prose style—acquired with ceaseless labor and care. Difficult as it is to judge this in translation, there are certain obvious features in Mr. Archer’s version which cannot escape the judicious reader. At its best, it has all the qualities of refined conversation—ease, flexibility, point, force, charming and cultivated manner. It has suspensions, interruptions, and an infinite variety of emotional suggestions,—all tending to fine dramatic effect. In the early plays, for example, “The League of Youth” and “The Pillars of Society,” the speeches assigned to each part are, in general, longer than in the later. The dialogue in the later plays tends to be more and more compressed, to consist—in many cases of several pages—of only a line or phrase to each character. The latest dramas, indeed, like “The Master Builder,” “Little Eyolf,” and “When We Dead Awake,” are almost wholly made up of this kind of prose. Thus, Ibsen secures not only rapidity and condensation, but the hint of a great deal of unuttered emotion. As specimens of his prose style, take the talk between Nora and Dr. Rank in the second act of “A Doll’s House,” or that between Nora and her husband in the third act after the tarantella has been danced. Take, too, the evening conversation (with the glow of the fire in the back-ground) in the second act of “Ghosts,” where Mrs. Alving, with Oswald and Regina

before her, tells the latter of her parentage. Finer still is the dialogue between Dr. Wangel and Ellida, in "The Lady from the Sea," when Ellida in the midst of the lovely "pale half light of a summer night," tells her husband of her ring-betrothal to the strange sailor. Yet again, and perhaps finest of all because most touched with poetic suggestion, is the last talk of Rosmer and Rebecca in "Rosmersholm." Beautiful, though in strict keeping with the dramatic situation, is her confession of the great change from desire to love that came over her: "All the rest—the horrible sense-intoxicated desire—passed far, far away from me. All the whirling passions settled down into quiet and silence. Rest descended on my soul—a stillness of our northern bird-cliffs under the midnight sun."

From the references just made it will be noticed that Ibsen tends to reduce his situations to two characters and tends to reduce the number of characters in the whole play to four or five at most. This, again, is in harmony with his psychological manner. The first two prose dramas here, as in so many other ways, are exceptions. There are fifteen fairly distinct characters in "The League of Youth;" there are at least ten in "The Pillars of Society." But in "A Doll's House" there are only five, and in "Ghosts," five. "An Enemy of the People" and "The Wild Duck" seem to revert to the earlier manner, for each has from nine to ten persons. The next three dramas, on the other hand, have five or six, while the latest, "Little Eyolf," "The Master Builder," and "When We Dead Awake," have three or four. This plainly indicates the tendency of the subjective manner—at least as cultivated by Ibsen. His interest is less and less in the extraneous concerns of the individual, and more and more in internal psychical change; until, when we come to the last drama, the tragedy centres almost exclusively in the inner life of the Sculptor and the Strange Lady. For this very reason, indeed, it might be strongly argued that Ibsen, in his last three or four plays, is less successful as a dramatist. His subjective method, accentuated with too much symbolism and hints of telepathic influences, takes the place of a certain amount of objectivity necessary to all dramatic representation.

Worth noting, in connection with the predominance of two-character situations in Ibsen, is the almost total absence of soliloquy. In the nine plays, I can recall but one instance of its use, and that but slight. I refer to "A Doll's House." Ibsen avoids this interesting, if often dangerous, device of exposing his plots and his characters. Not less noteworthy than the omission of soliloquy is his management of the three unities. Here Ibsen is likewise a master. "The League of Youth" is the one drama that even slightly violates the fundamental unity of action. When the three-cornered love-intrigue is developed in the third act, Ibsen sacrifices to some extent the political plot. The time occupied in the action of a drama is generally a part of one day for each act, with no intervening days,—an arrangement well-suited to this species of drama; though sometimes the development or change in characters during this short time is improbable. The only exceptions to this time-rule are "Ghosts," "The Wild Duck," and "Rosmersholm." In "The Wild Duck," acts one and two occupy parts of the first day, acts three and four morning, afternoon, and evening of the second day, and act five the morning of the third day. The first two acts of "Rosmersholm" take two successive days, but the third and fourth acts belong to different parts of a single day. "Ghosts" presents a unique case, all the action being compressed into one day. It has thus the character of a Greek drama, not only in its swift, fatal movement, but in its perfect unity of time, action, and place. The place in the other dramas changes but slightly; from the Chamberlain's to Madam Rundholmen's, for example, in "The League of Youth," and from Dr. Stockmann's house to the printing-office in "The Pillars of Society;" while in "A Doll's House" and "Rosmersholm" the place is kept within a single house.

But we need not go further. Ibsen is the master technician of modern dramatists. From this point of view alone, his dramas are fascinating to study and stir admiration with each fresh reading. Ibsen, however, is more than a technician; he is a great dramatist in his power to create living human beings, and a poet and philosopher in his profound interest in what these creatures do and say in this modern world of ours. Nora

is to my mind his greatest character — the most human, with the truest individuality — a real unforgettable person, ever to be spoken of by her own name, Nora, as we speak of Imogen, Portia, and Rosalind. Less real, but clearly individualized, are Lona Hessel and Martha, Mrs. Alving, Rebecca, Ellida, Gina Ekdal, Hedda Gabler, and (if I may go beyond the nine dramas), Asta and Rita in "Little Eyolf," Hilda in "The Master Builder," and Maia in "When We Dead Awake." His men are far less interesting — many of them unbearable prigs, like Helmer, Pastor Manders, Rector Rörland — or infatuated idealists, dead to humor, like Gregers Werle, Tesman and Rosmer. Indeed, I think that Ibsen too frequently gains his intensely tragic effects through the narrow-mindedness of these essentially provincial types of men. Mrs. Alving's tragedy happens because she took the advice of a bigot; and Nora's comes from living with an imbecile husband who will not take Krogstad back into the bank because he is afraid the latter will become too familiar with him. Such weaklings happen in real life, of course; but we do not let them block our way, and they are not the stuff of which the sternest spiritual tragedies are made.

Moreover, Ibsen goes so far in some of his tragedies as to transgress the bounds of sound art. "Hedda Gabler" is, as Matthew Arnold says of "Madame Bovary," "a work of *petrified feeling*, over it hangs an atmosphere of bitterness, irony, impotence; not a personage to rejoice or console us; the springs of freshness and feeling are not there to create such personages." This is literally true; it is, as Arnold said of his own "Empedocles," too painful for tragedy. It has in it nothing to purge the emotions with pity and fear. "Rosmersholm" is open to the same criticism; it has no ray of light, nothing to subdue our feelings at the close like the passage at the end of Shakespeare's "Julius Cæsar," in which Antony eulogizes Brutus:

His life was gentle, and the elements
So mix'd in him that Nature might stand up
And say to all the world, This was a man!

In truth, though powerful and penetrating, Ibsen on the side of

his dramatic criticism of life is narrow, individual, and often painful. Into all his work he has put some of his own bitter, anti-social, iconoclastic spirit. Nevertheless, one will read and reread such works as "Peer Gynt" and "Brand," "A Doll's House" and "Ghosts," "Little Eyolf" and "When We Dead Awake" with fresh enjoyment of Ibsen's eminent ability as a craftsman and of his indubitable sincerity and depth as a dramatist and poet.

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